

**Date:** Friday 10 December 1999

**Time:** 10.00am to 1.00pm

**Venue:** Main Chamber, Gwynedd Council Offices, Shirehall Street, Caernarfon

**Attendance**

*Members*

Gareth Jones, Chair	Conwy
Alison Halford	Delyn
Christine Humphreys	North Wales
John Marek	Wrexham
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
Alun Pugh	Clwyd West
Peter Rogers	North Wales
Janet Ryder	North Wales

*In attendance*

*North Wales Fire Service*

Phillip Quinn	Chief Fire Officer
Peter Coles	Deputy Chief Fire Officer

*North Wales Local Authorities*

Cllr Alun Ffred Jones	Leader, Gwynedd Council
Geraint Jones	Chief Executive, Gwynedd Council
Cllr A Aldridge	Leader, Flintshire County Council

Philip McGreevy	Chief Executive, Flintshire County Council
Cllr Sue Jones	Conwy County Borough Council
Derek Barker -	Chief Executive, Conwy County Borough Council
Cllr Elwyn Edwards	Chairman, Denbighshire County Council
Huw V Thomas	Chief Executive, Denbighshire County Council
Cllr J Woodrow	Deputy Leader, Wrexham County Borough Council
Derek Griffin	Chief Executive - Wrexham County Borough Council
Cllr OG Jones	Deputy Leader, Isle of Anglesey County Council
Geraint Edwards	Managing Director, Isle of Anglesey County Council
<i>Secretariat</i>	
Adrian Crompton	Clerk
Howell Rees	Deputy Clerk

## **Introduction and apologies**

The Chair thanked Gwynedd Council for their hospitality and said that apologies had been received from Dafydd Elis Thomas, Ann Jones, Rod Richards, Karen Sinclair, Dafydd Wigley and Ieuan Wyn Jones.

## **Item 1: Presentation by the North Wales Fire Authority followed by discussion**

The Chief Fire Officer, Phil Quinn, gave a brief introduction. The Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Peter Coles then gave a presentation which covered the history and structure of the North Wales Fire Service, some basic statistics, budget, pensions, best value, retained staff, equal opportunities, training and the communications strategy. Key themes that emerged were funding the service, the cost of pensions in the next five to ten years and the recruitment and retention of retained fire fighters.

The Chair then opened the discussion session and the following questions were raised and points made:

- *False alarms had been identified as an area of concern. There were twice as many system faults as malicious calls. What was being done to reduce these levels?* The Committee noted that the system's faults were usually the result of neglect and poor maintenance of automatic alarms and efforts were being made to encourage property owners to address this. The high level of

malicious calls was also a problem, particularly from school children. Where telephones, or telephone boxes, had been identified as being responsible for a large number of malicious calls, callers were asked a number of questions to ascertain whether the call was genuine. If the caller did not respond appropriately, or at all, an appliance may not be mobilised. This problem was greatest for small, one appliance, stations because if an appliance responded to a malicious call, there was no back up for a real emergency. As part of the Community Fire Safety programme the service was therefore trying to educate school children to understand the danger of malicious calls.

- *Did the Service have an approved Welsh language scheme?* The Committee noted that a scheme had been approved and was out to consultation. The intention was that all staff in control and key posts, such as reception, personnel and fire safety officers in predominately Welsh speaking areas, should be bilingual. At the control centre in Rhyl at least one Welsh speaker was available at all times. English speaking staff there were taking Welsh lessons and all new recruits had to be bilingual.
- *In view of the pressure on the capital budget was a revenue contribution made to capital?* The Committee noted that nearly all new appliances were purchased through operating leases but at the end of a lease the Service did not own the capital item. The level of capital allocation for 2000-2001 at £480,000 was still less than half of that previously allocated to Clwyd and Gwynedd Fire Services. Capital requirements year on year were between £1.5 and £2 million and with 50 properties throughout North Wales a replacement programme of at least one every two years would account for all of the allocation. Most retained stations would cost between £300,000 and £400,000 to replace and the investment is too low to attract investment through the Private Finance Initiative. The proposed investment in a new station at Llanfairfechan would account for almost the whole of one year's capital allocation.
- *What was being done to address the view that nationally the Service was failing on equal opportunities?* The Committee noted that training was being provided and, to address the problem of attracting sufficient retained fire fighters in smaller communities, efforts were being made to recruit more female and ethnic minority staff. The Service currently employed four full time and ten retained female fire fighters.
- *How could the Assembly help with the problem of recruitment and retention of retained staff and did the national minimum wage apply to retained staff?* The Committee noted that a proper pension and changes to the pay structure to allow higher hourly payments to be made for certain hours to retained staff would help address many of the current difficulties. However larger English fire authorities, such as the Metropolitan brigades, employ few, if any, retained staff and therefore have little interest in the problems relating to them. The Assembly's influence with the Home Office would therefore be welcomed. Retained staff are paid above the national minimum wage for all training and incidents. Retained staff's entitlement to annual leave payments and pensions under European legislation was currently being examined in the courts.
- *How was the North Wales Fire Service addressing the expected increase in pension costs over the next five to ten years?* The Committee noted that an agreement had been reached with the local authorities in North Wales that the first £400,000 of any under spend each year could be transferred to a pension reserve fund. It was anticipated that, providing this underspend was available until at least 2002/2003, there would be sufficient money in the fund to cover forecast

pension requirements until 2010.

- *Would employing more full time fire fighters be a solution to the difficulty of recruiting retained staff?* The Committee noted that this would be a very expensive option as the cost of running one retained station for a year was equivalent to the salaries of three wholetime fire fighters. A better solution was to recruit retained staff locally and encourage employers to see releasing staff for fire fighting as a community service.
- *Concern was expressed with the statement that, at any particular time, between 6 and 12 stations might not have sufficient crew to provide a service. In view of these problems what was the longest response time?* The Committee noted that the North Wales Fire Service met 98% of calls within the required response times. Where response times were outside requirements this was usually by no more than one or two minutes. However in one recent case there was a 45 minute delay in responding to a car fire and action was being taken to ensure this did not happen again. It was emphasised that in general the stations that were not available through insufficient staff were not available during the day Monday to Friday because of the change in people's working patterns, which meant they no longer lived and worked in the local community. It was therefore difficult to recruit retained personnel.
- *Fire risk in offices and factories had been reduced significantly. Fires in homes had not reduced to the same extent and were often worse because of the failure of battery operated smoke alarms. How could this be addressed?* The Committee noted that through the Community Fire Safety programme people were being encouraged to install smoke detectors. Local authorities and housing associations were being asked, wherever possible, to use hard wired alarm systems, as one of the major problems was the maintenance of smoke detectors and the replacement of dead batteries. Attempts were being made to extend the use of hard wired systems to private homes but, as they were much more expensive than independent smoke alarms, this had proved difficult to achieve.

## **Item 2: Presentation by the North Wales local authorities followed by discussion**

Councillor Alun Ffred Jones, Leader of Gwynedd County, gave a presentation on the new political structures for local government. The key themes to emerge were the need for flexibility, so that local solutions could be found, the need to find a meaningful role for councillors not in executive positions and the lack of discretion for local authorities on spending.

Phillip McGreevy, Chief Executive of Flintshire County Borough Council, gave a presentation on best value. Local authorities in Wales had embraced the principles of best value and were currently formulating their response to the National Assembly's guidance on implementation. Having agreed the overall guidelines for best value, the next stage was to develop a dialogue between local government and the Assembly on the challenges best value presents.

The Chair then opened the discussion session and the following points were made:

- There was a potential tension between the best value principle that local government should listen

and respond to the views of its residents, and the specification by the Assembly of priorities for local government;

- The Assembly should avoid becoming too involved in decisions about how local authorities spend their budgets;
- Where there was disagreement about central and local priorities, the Partnership Council might have a role in defining boundaries and responsibilities;
- Concern was expressed about the proliferation of inspections and inspectorates which diverted funds from frontline service provision and could restrict the introduction of local solutions for local problems;
- There was a need, though, to assure the public that local government met certain value for money and propriety standards. There was, therefore, a balance to be struck.

Summarising the discussion the Chair said that the challenge for the Assembly was to improve the quality of life for the people of Wales. The Assembly and local government had to work together and establish the right balance between their roles. The Assembly was still in its early days and should be given a chance to show what it could achieve. The messages from local government at the meeting would be taken back to the Assembly. The Chair thanked the local authorities for their presentations and for the frank discussion that had followed.

### **Item 3: Report by the informal group on north/south rail links**

John Marek said that the group had met informally on a number of occasions and kept an eye on developments. He welcomed the decision to make provision in the budget for improving north south rail links. He said he had written to the First Secretary proposing that the group should meet the BBTIES group and see its terms of reference but had not yet received a reply. He proposed that the group should continue to meet informally but that secretariat support should be provided. He said the group considered the upgrading and electrification of the north Wales line using objective 1 money was vital.

In discussion the following points were made:

- the Assembly had little control over transport policy in Wales and should push for more. For example the Assembly could not nominate a member to the new Strategic Rail Authority. New rolling stock was soon to be available on the north Wales line and the need for electrification was not clear;
- a short debate on north/south rail links was to be held in Plenary session the following week. Links were important for the economy and the unity of the nation. Any objective 1 investment in upgrading the north Wales line must not end up in Railtrack's pocket;
- any decisions on investment in the north Wales line should wait for the results of the study being carried out into transport links in Wales;
- the Committee needed to give a strong message that the issue of north/south links and investment in the north Wales line needed to be examined by the Local Government and Environment Committee.

Summarising the discussion the Chair said that the Committee had agreed that:

- the group on north south rail links would continue on an informal basis with occasional secretariat support; and
- a letter would be sent to the Chair of the Local Government and Environment Committee, copied to the Assembly Secretary for Local Government and Environment, asking that Committee to examine the upgrading of the north Wales line and north/south rail links.

*Action point*

Letter to be drafted for the Chair to send to the Chair of the Local Government and Environment Committee - **Secretariat**

**Item 4: Sustainable Development roadshow**

The Chair said that Regional Committee Chairs had agreed to hold roadshows as part of the public consultation on the Assembly's Sustainable Development Scheme. Subject to the Committee's agreement, in order to feed into the consultation process the date for North Wales Committee's meeting would be 11 February 2000.

The aim of the roadshow would be to provide an opportunity for people who might not usually respond to a consultation exercise to give their views. As well as an open mike session for the public, the meeting would also allow time for local organisations and sustainable development bodies to make short presentations.

The Committee agreed the proposal and the Chair said that the Secretariat would circulate a paper to Members before Christmas giving further details

**Item 5: Minutes of 8 October meeting**

The minutes of the 8 October 1999 meeting were adopted.

**Secretariat**

**December 1999**